

DETERMINISM, EGOTISM AND MORALS

BY JOHN HEINTZ

THERE is probably nothing so destructive of human egotism as the idea of determinism. Even the theory of evolution, with its long line of brutish ancestors, leaves a way of escape open for the salvaging of this universal and often useful attribute. But the one hundred per cent determinist gets little satisfaction in the way of self-applause due to noteworthy performance.

The old saying of virtue being its own reward fits admirably into his system of philosophy but even here the glow of satisfaction which the free will advocate may experience is denied him, or at least is largely mitigated, by the belief that his virtuous acts are simply so much ethical phenomena in which he plays the part of a link in an endless chain of cause and effect.

One is tempted to ask, therefore, what use can there be in such a theory of conduct if the result of possessing it is the dampening of such a stimulating motive as egotism? One answer which has been given is that for a sound moral theory good conduct must depend upon character, which is equivalent to saying that if a man cannot, merely by the exercise of free will, go against the dictates of his conscience we have something which constitutes a real and permanent basis for a moral theory. However, while this may be a step in the direction of determinism it does not disprove the idea of free will except in an absolute sense; it does put brakes on it, conditions it, but it does not dispose of the claim of the free will advocates that a moral theory to be real must allow for a certain amount of free choice in the individual, that we possess such a freedom of choice, and that a moral act consists in the right exercise of it more so than in the good effect of the action itself.

It will immediately be seen that the notion that over and above all

influencing circumstances, both objective and subjective, we possess an element of dissociation which leaves us free to *choose* a course of conduct and which assigns egotism to an important position in the system of free will, and that determinism, in denying this element of dissociation automatically removes egotism from its philosophy. In other words, in free will, credit for good conduct is earned; in determinism, it is unearned. Getting back to our question then if conditioned free will is not discredited by a moral theory which bases good conduct upon character and if it retains by its ideas of dissociation a subtle element of egotism which makes it appear desirable what claims can determinism advance for possessing a sounder theory of morals?

Probably the best claim that determinism can advance is that it can be shown that it is logically related to the kind of a universe which science has revealed to us. Free will naturally associates itself with the deductive, or intuitive, theory of morals. It coincides with its assumption that we have within us a perceptive faculty which enables us to sense right from wrong and that this intuitive gift is originally innate in the constitution of our nature. Out of this innate moral insight conscience springs and here again we come across the notion of dissociation which we found to be essential to free will. Now such an assumption of innate conscience, so suggestive of divine origin, naturally presupposes a reason for its being which can be no other than that it was implanted in us as a guide to conduct and this in turn consistently, if not necessarily, suggests a free choice in the matter.

Determinism, on the other hand, while it is not absolutely inconsistent with the idea of innate moral perceptions, links itself up more logically with the inductive, or utilitarian, theory of morals. The notion that morals were originally based on utility and by a successive association of ideas became metamorphosed into ideals coalesces readily with the belief that conscience is not innate but is subject entirely to the laws of heredity and therefore is a variable phenomenon forming a link in a chain of causes and effects. Thus determinism, because it views every moral and immoral act as a perfect result of foregoing causes, of which the type of conscience exhibited constitutes one, is the logical corollary of the utilitarian theory.

As for the claims for truth of these two opposing theories of

morals I believe that the theory of evolution and the researches of modern psychology have made a damaging case against the school of Butler and Cudworth. Unquestionably, utility is the basis of morals. It is requesting too much of the modern intellect to ask it to believe that our brute ancestors of former geologic periods possessed an innate conscience and if they did not its sudden appearance in the human race defies explanation. The truth is that conscience has been a result of ages of slow development. In no other way, consistent with the known physical facts of our world, can its presence be accounted for. In no way, save by heredity, can the infinite variety and gradations of conscience be explained.

Thus determinism, because it is the logical outgrowth of the theory of morals which gives the best explanation for conduct in the kind of world which science has revealed to us, affords the best promise of establishing human conduct on a scientific basis. It strikes a blow immediately at the conception of equality implicit in free will which it has been the misfortune of religion to emphasize. Thus the sinner can save himself if he only will. Failure to do so is due to obstinacy or indifference on his part. Left out of consideration are such psychologically important things as heredity, emotional stability, meagre subliminal activity. Congenital obstacles in the way of reform never mitigate the censure of the religionist for the unregenerate.

With such conceptions of an innate equality of moral insight determinism can make no compromise. It is committed to the belief that all conduct, good, bad and indifferent, can be entirely explained by the antecedent conditions of which inequality of conscience and will are themselves results of causality.

Now it is this attempt to get at the rock-bottom facts underlying conduct, instead of assuming that man possesses an innate moral faculty which his remote physical ancestry refutes, that causes determinism to appear so promising when it comes to placing human conduct upon a scientific basis. It declares that were the antecedent causes leading up to an individual's choice completely known, it could be predicted with as sure a certainty as the chemist can predict results in his laboratory. All the psychological theories as to the influence of environment and other determining factors in normal and subnormal life are based ultimately upon this belief which in turn rests upon the knowledge that nature is perfect.

For an imperfect result cannot emanate from nature. A cripple is a perfect cripple according to time and conditions. The antecedent causes in his case having been thus and thus he is the perfect result. So with conduct; every act must be a perfect result of objective and subjective causes. Here then, considered in the large, is the justification for the sacrifice of egotism by determinism: it affords an approach to the exceedingly difficult problem of conduct that is based on things as they are; not as we would like them to be and therefore assume so. Thus, of the two theories of morals, determinism, not free will, belongs in the promising category of an experimental science.

As to the individual reaction to the loss of egotism the question has to do with a morally superior and inferior viewpoint. Egotism often plays a beneficent role in human conduct and must be given a place by determinism in the chain of antecedent causes. Thus the desire to be well thought of by his fellowmen impels an individual to virtuous actions. Still such an incentive, however practical or efficacious it may be, is an egotistical one, because the individual is seeking credit for something he could not help but do. From the deterministic view-point pride over conduct is related to conceit over good looks. A large element of humanity has reached the intellectual stage where, inasmuch as they realize that good looks are but an accident of birth, vanity with respect to them arouses their derision. For while good looks, rather than ugliness, is to be desired we feel that no credit accrues to the possessor.

Such is the attitude of the determinist towards his own good conduct. Like the Sufi who give all credit to the Creator for their virtue the determinist attributes his moral acts altogether to impelling causes. He has a high regard for good conduct and acts in accordance with his ethical convictions but takes no more credit for such acts in the last analysis than for good looks if he is fortunate enough to possess them. His compensation for the loss of egotism is that he has reached an intellectual position where he is beyond the egotistical need of the applause of his fellowmen. A pure and unadulterated incentive to good conduct is the last word in morals.